



TITLE:

Is the wellbeing of individuals only what matters?  
(Proceedings of the CAPE International Workshops, 2013.  
Part I: The CAPE International Conference “Ethics and Well-being”)

AUTHOR(S):

Chonabayashi, Ryo

---

CITATION:

Chonabayashi, Ryo. Is the wellbeing of individuals only what matters? (Proceedings of the CAPE International Workshops, 2013. Part I: The CAPE International Conference “Ethics and Well-being”). CAPE Studies in Applied Philosophy and Ethics Serie ...

ISSUE DATE:

2014-03-24

URL:

<https://doi.org/10.17983/203269>

RIGHT:

# **Is the wellbeing of individuals only what matters?**

**Ryo Chonabayashi**

Wellbeing theories tell us about individual wellbeing: those theories tell us when and how an individual life goes well or badly. But we also consider what group wellbeing is. We wonder when and how social groups, such as family, friends, couples, and so on, do well or badly. In this article, I shall consider the nature of group wellbeing. I shall examine two extreme views on group wellbeing, and argue that both of them are false. After arguing for the falsity of those two extreme views on group wellbeing, I shall present some issues concerning group wellbeing which need to be pursued further.

## **The Issue**

Theories of wellbeing are often given as theories about the wellbeing of individuals. See what some leading theorists say about wellbeing.

[Welfare] attaches pre-eminently to the lives of individuals, and a person's welfare is more or less the same as her well-being or interest or (in one of its many meanings) her good... What is it for a life to go well (or badly)? (Sumner 1996: 1)

I wish to discuss hedonism as a theory of well-being, that is, of what is ultimately good for any individual (Crisp 2006: 100)

I will argue that happiness is most profitably understood as a matter of a person's overall emotional condition (Haybron 2005: 288)

[Well-being] is important in the thinking of a benefactor and in moral argument because of its importance for the individual whose well-being it is ... It represents what an individual has reason to want for him – or herself, leaving aside concern for others and any moral restraints or obligations. Well-being is thus an input into moral thinking that is not already shaped by moral assumptions (Scanlon 1998: 111)

What we take from these remarks is that these writers take wellbeing as a property which belongs to individuals or their lives.

But some writers mention or indicate the wellbeing of groups, not of individuals.

Whatever the exact function of the concept of well-being in various disciplines, it certainly is often assumed to play a role in determining both what I should pursue in my own life, and what I should promote in the lives of others. Incidentally, the concept of well-being is often applied to groups and nations as well as to individuals, and supposed to play a role as a basis for the deliberations by governments regarding public policy (Angner 2008)

[The] best sort of friendship provides us with companions with whom we can share goods and interests in a jointly pursued life. This sort of shared happiness constitutes the truly self-sufficient life (Sherman 1987: 596)

Imagine a person who shares her intention to leave the school with her school friends. Before she shares the fact that she is going to leave the school with the friends, the fact is not of community. But once she shares the fact with the friends, the pain generated by that fact becomes the friends' pain (Watsuji 1937/1990a: 222)

(When two individuals form a community), if one is in pain, the other is also in pain. One's honour is also an honour for the other ... There is no such 'I' between individuals who form a community (Watsuji 1937/1990b: 97) <sup>1</sup>

What we take from these remarks is that these writers mention a kind of wellbeing which can be called 'group wellbeing'.

<sup>1</sup> I thank Mike Campbell for pointing out that Watsuji could be read as one of those who are concerned not only about individual wellbeing but also about group wellbeing. The translation of Watsuji's work quoted in the text is done by the author.

Group wellbeing is not an alien idea. When we look at our linguistic expressions, we can find various examples which seem to be referring to not individual wellbeing but group wellbeing. We say, ‘is this decision good for us?’, ‘is this house good for that family?’, ‘is this policy good for the country?’, and so on. These expressions seem to be referring to group wellbeing.

What is the relation between individual wellbeing and group wellbeing? In this paper, I shall consider two theses which are possible answers to this question.

The first answer is what I call *I* thesis.

(*I* thesis)

Group wellbeing is always the sum of the wellbeing of individuals.

If *I* thesis is true, the wellbeing of my family *just is* the sum of the wellbeing of each family member: my family is going well if and only if each family member is doing well.

The second answer is what I call *G* thesis.

(*G* thesis)

Group wellbeing is *always* not the sum of the wellbeing of individuals.

If *G* thesis is true, the wellbeing of our family cannot be realised even if all the family members’ individual wellbeing is realised.

In this paper I take these theses as metaphysical claims.<sup>2</sup> *I* thesis says that group wellbeing is *reducible* to individual wellbeing: group wellbeing is realised if and only if corresponding individual wellbeing is realised. *G* thesis says that there are not even token identity relations between each instance of group wellbeing and each instance of individual wellbeing: it is always the case that individual wellbeing alone does not generate group wellbeing.

Through considering two cases when we seem to be concerned about group wellbeing, I shall argue that both *I* thesis and *G* thesis must be rejected, and a hybrid thesis which I call *H* thesis must be right. I shall then consider some issues concerning group wellbeing which need to be pursued further.

---

<sup>2</sup> Another way to take these theses is to take them as normative claims. If we take it as a normative claim, *I* thesis would be implying that one should only be concerned about the individuals of a group if one should be concerned about the group.

## Group Wellbeing: Two Cases

I shall consider two cases when we seem to be concerned about group wellbeing. The first case is what I call Family Case.

(Family Case) You are a member of a family which consists of you, your parents and your brother. The family are discussing whether the family should move to another country: the father who is taking the financial responsibility for the family is offered a well-paid job in another country. When you are discussing the issue with your family, you say, ‘well, I think it is good for me to move to another country. If we went to another country, I would enjoy the new stage of my life. But I wonder if the decision is actually good for the family as a whole, not only for me’.

The phrase ‘good for the family’ seems to be referring to one instance of group wellbeing, namely the wellbeing of the family as a whole while the phrase ‘good for me’ seems to be referring to one instance of individual wellbeing, namely your own wellbeing.

What is the relation between the wellbeing of the family as a whole and the sum of the wellbeing of each family member in this case? Some considerations on Family Case support *I* thesis and provide reason to reject *G* thesis.

Consider the following two relevant cases. In the first case the decision gives the parents pleasure while it gives the children pain perhaps due to their untimely separation with their friends. In the second case the decision gives all the family members pleasure. What is the wellbeing of the family realised in each case? In which case is the wellbeing of the family better realised? The answer seems to be obvious: the wellbeing of the family is better realised in the second case than the first case. If we want to hold this intuitive judgement concerning the wellbeing of the family, we might need *I* thesis. *I* thesis gives us a straightforward explanation of why in the second case the wellbeing of group is better realised than the first case. *I* thesis says that the amount of group wellbeing just is the amount of individual wellbeing. The amount of group wellbeing realised in the first case may be represented as 2 while the amount of group wellbeing realised in the second case may be represented as 4.  $2 < 4$ , so the amount of group wellbeing realised in the second case is better or bigger than the amount in the first case.

The upshot is that some considerations concerning Family Case might require the truth of *I* thesis. Another important lesson from the considerations above is that there is a significant relation between group wellbeing and individual wellbeing. This lesson leads us to

rejecting *G* thesis which denies such a relation. Should we then conclude that *G* thesis is false and we should accept *I* thesis? The answer seems to be ‘no’. Consider the following case.

(Football Case) <sup>3</sup> Ankit is the captain of his school football team. Rob is another player in the team. Rob is the best forward in the league and his good performance always benefits the team. Because of Rob’s great talent, the team is expected to win the upcoming winter games. Nevertheless, Rob is thinking to leave the team. Nowadays, he is losing his passion for football. He is planning leaving the team for spending more time for study. Rob shares his idea with Ankit. Ankit replies, ‘hey Rob, please think about your decision carefully. Your decision is highly relevant to how well our team would go. If you left the team, the consequence would be very bad for the team. But if you stayed in the team, the consequence should be very good for the team. Please think about your decision again’.

Ankit uses the following expressions, ‘how well our team would go’, ‘the consequence would be very bad for the team’, ‘the consequence should be very good for the team’, ‘If you are concerned about the team’. These expressions seem to be referring to the wellbeing of the team which is an instance of group wellbeing.

A simple fact everyone can accept is that there is a reasonable explanation of why Rob’s leaving the team is potentially bad for the team. That is because if he leaves the team the team might not be able to win the upcoming games. The team’s strength depends on Rob’s talent. The content of the goodness for the team is this: it is the team’s capability to win the upcoming games. If the team keeps this capability, it goes well while if it loses the capability it goes badly. More precisely: the team’s having the capability to win the games is good for the team.

Given this consideration, let us see the plausibility of *I* thesis. It seems Football Case provides reason to be doubtful about *I* thesis.

Suppose the true theory of wellbeing is one version of hedonism according to which one’s life is going well if and only if one is having a life with the greatest balance of pleasure over pain. Now, it is conceivable that all the members of the team have the pleasure of seeing Rob’s leaving the team though the team loses the capability to win the upcoming games.

---

<sup>3</sup> I thank Yuuki Ohta for making me think that an example about a sports team may give a clear picture of group wellbeing.

Although Rob has considerable talent for getting many goals, his performance tends to be rather selfish and other team members actually do not like Rob's style. In this case, Rob's leaving the team could give all the team members pleasure, including Ankit who is just pretending to change Rob's mind, though it is obvious that the team as a whole loses the capability to win the games. Because the team loses its capability to win the games, its wellbeing is also diminished. What is given here is a case when the wellbeing of the team is not realised even when all the members' wellbeing is realised.

Even if we employ a version of desire-satisfaction theory according to which one's life is going well if and only if one would desire that life given all the relevant information, the conclusion we reach is the same. Suppose, because of the same reason we have seen in the previous case, namely the fact that Rob's playing-style is selfish, all the members desire Rob's leaving the team. In this case, all the team members' wellbeing is realised by Rob's leaving the team though it is clear that it is bad for the team.

We have not yet considered objective-list theory according to which one's life is going well if and only if one is gaining certain goods. *I* thesis can be maintained if the sum of each team member's wellbeing contains the team's keeping its capability to win the games: *I* thesis can be still held if for making each team member's life good, it is necessary for the team to keep the capability to win the games. But this idea is doubtful. The problem is that any plausible objective-list theory would not include maintaining the team's capability to win the games as one of the goods which are necessary for an individual's wellbeing. The necessary goods for an individual's wellbeing which are traditionally thought are such as knowledge, virtue and so forth. These items are considered as constituents of individual wellbeing because they are intrinsically valuable: they are valuable because of their intrinsic nature. But is a football team's capability to win some games intrinsically valuable? Perhaps it is not. A football team's having such a capability is valuable because the capacity could generate certain other things, such as the team's attracting more young students to join the team, the team's giving its members pleasure, and so forth. Because these extrinsic things make the capability valuable, the capability itself is not intrinsically valuable.

The upshot is that even if we employ objective-list theory of wellbeing, Football Case is still a problem for *I* thesis.

## **Some Issues**

The considerations of Family Case and Football Case indicate that both *I* thesis and *G* thesis are false. A more plausible thesis may be a following hybrid thesis which I call *H* thesis:

(*H* thesis)

Group wellbeing is only sometimes the sum of the wellbeing of individuals.

*H* thesis says that the relation between group wellbeing and individual wellbeing is not straightforward though there is some relation between them. This poses many interesting questions and issues concerning group wellbeing.

First, one might think that there are different kinds of group wellbeing. One might think that some of instances of group wellbeing are reducible to individual wellbeing while some others are not reducible to individual wellbeing. Due to Family Case, one might think that if the members of a group are small, the group wellbeing also tends to be just the sum of individual wellbeing, hence in such a case the reductive relation is held. But this idea may be challenged: there might be some cases when group wellbeing is significantly diminished without any loss of individual wellbeing even if the members of groups are very small. Some examples may be found when we consider analogous cases to Football Case, such as a case concerning a pair of tennis players. It might be the case that dissolving the pair is bad for the team since the team loses its capability to win games though it might benefit each player because, say, both players want to stop playing tennis for some reason.

Second, one might wonder what would be the normative significance of group wellbeing. It is usually thought that wellbeing in general is normatively significant: one's wellbeing is normatively significant in the way whether an action contributes to one's wellbeing is relevant to one's practical reasoning. If there is no significant moral difference between two actions, *A* and *B*, whether you should do *A* or *B* may depend on which action better realises your wellbeing. Group wellbeing seems to be normatively significant in a similar way: if one is a member of a group, that group's wellbeing should be relevant to one's practical reasoning.

As Family Case shows, group wellbeing is sometimes reducible to individual wellbeing, and such cases do not pose any issue concerning the normative significance of group wellbeing. In those cases, group wellbeing is normatively significant just because corresponding individual wellbeing which is the reductive base of group wellbeing is normatively significant.



Interesting cases are cases when group wellbeing cannot be reducible to individual wellbeing, such as Football Case. What is the normative significance of group wellbeing when it is not reducible to individual wellbeing? Given that for Rob leaving the team is bad for the team while his leaving the team is good for him as an individual, what is the best decision for him? Football Case seems to be saying that group wellbeing is normatively inferior to individual wellbeing: if all the team members, including Rob himself, feels pleasure if Rob leaves the team, there seems to be no question concerning the conflict between group wellbeing and individual wellbeing: it is just very obvious that in this case individual wellbeing is normatively more significant than group wellbeing and Rob should leave the team. This consideration leads us to the thesis that group wellbeing is always normatively inferior to individual wellbeing. The thesis may be right, but it might need to be defended properly.

Another relevant issue is the one concerning the relation between wellbeing and morality. It has been traditionally thought that wellbeing is, not only prudentially relevant, but also morally relevant. For instance, many moral theories hold that one's action may be blamed if it diminishes someone's wellbeing in the absence of any other moral consideration. Once we take the distinction between group wellbeing and individual wellbeing seriously, some new questions concerning the relation between group wellbeing and morality would arise. One of such questions is this. Suppose you can save either three individuals or one family which consists of three individuals. Is there any moral reason for us to prefer saving the family to the three individuals? If there is, does this support the idea that in some cases group wellbeing is morally significant than individual wellbeing? Answering these questions might require some discussions of the value of individuals and of groups. In this discussion, some argument for the following claim may be presented: that a possible world where three individuals form a family is better than a possible world where three individuals exist though they do not have any human relationship. If so, we would be inclined to conclude that we should save the family rather than the three individuals in the scenario. Or, at the outset in this discussion we could conclude that there is no moral difference between saving three individuals and a family which consists of three individuals. In either case, the conclusions need to be properly defended.

## Conclusion

Interesting issues concerning group wellbeing may be waiting for us to be further investigated. More work on the nature of group wellbeing could reveal how individual wellbeing and group wellbeing are relevant to not only our prudential reasoning but also moral decisions.

## Note

An earlier version of the paper was presented at International Discussion of Ethics and Well-being at Kyoto University, Kyoto, November 2013. I thank those who attended for their comments.

## References

- [1] Angner, E. (2008) "The Philosophical Foundations of Subjective Measures of Well-Being," in Luigino Bruni, Flavio Comim, and Maurizio Pugno (Eds.) *Capabilities and Happiness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 286–298.
- [2] Crisp, R. (2006) *Reasons and the Good*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Haybron, D. (2005) "On Being Happy or Unhappy," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 71. No.2: 287–317.
- [4] Scanlon, T. M. (1998) *What We Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- [5] Sherman, N. (1987) "Aristotle on Friendship and the Shared Life," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 47, no. 4: 589–613
- [6] Sumner, L. W. (1996) *Welfare, Happiness and Ethics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [7] Watsuji, T. (1937/1990a) *Rinrigaku*, vol.1, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. [Japanese].
- [8] Watsuji, T. (1937/1990b) *Rinrigaku*, vol.2, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. [Japanese].